

BELARUS 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants the freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” A concordat grants the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, and the law recognizes the “determining role of the BOC” and historical importance of the “traditional faiths” of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups and requires all registered religious groups to obtain permits to proselytize or hold events outside of their premises, as well as prior approval from the authorities to import and distribute religious literature. During the year, the government increased the penalty for activities conducted by unregistered religious groups from a fine to imprisonment of two years.

Authorities continued to use laws regulating “mass events” to target members of the clergy and members of religious groups engaged in the prodemocracy movement that emerged following the 2020 fraudulent presidential election, as well as those protesting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Authorities detained numerous religious leaders in connection with these protests and also for reasons such as holding unauthorized baptisms, posting material on social media from a television station based in Poland deemed “extremist” by the regime, and publicly displaying materials from the political opposition. Human rights organizations said authorities restricted clergy access to prisons and denied pastoral visits to some political prisoners. According to observers, authorities continued surveillance of registered and unregistered religious groups, including through monitoring of social media. Following a fire in September, authorities evicted the congregation and barred access to the Catholic Church of St. Simon and St. Helena in Minsk, which has been subject to years-long tax and property disputes between the government and Catholic Church. In September, authorities prevented the New Life Church, engaged in a years-long tax dispute with authorities, from holding services in the parking lot of the building the church formerly occupied; authorities had removed the congregation from the building in February 2021.

While BOC Metropolitan Veniamin remained neutral in his statements on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, lower-level BOC leaders amplified Russia's propaganda on the war.

There were antisemitic comments on social media and in the comment sections of local online news articles, but the origin of some of the comments was undetermined. Several religious groups reported instances of vandalism of their properties. Interdenominational Christian groups continued to work together on education and charitable projects and also held seminars on issues related to interreligious and cross-cultural traditions and other topics.

The Chargé d'Affaires and other U.S. Embassy officials engaged on religious freedom issues, including registration of religious communities, state pressure on clergy, freedom to express and practice religious beliefs, freedom of expression for clergy who participated in activities that the state considered political, and antisemitism. The Chargé and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss antisemitism and the preservation of Jewish cultural heritage and participated in a November event in Minsk commemorating Holocaust victims. The Chargé and other embassy representatives also engaged Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other groups, as well as civil society activists, to learn about their religious activities and to discuss the regime's actions affecting the exercise of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.4 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration (the latest such data available), approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC, 6 percent to the Roman Catholic Church, 8 percent is atheist, and 22 percent is "uncertain." Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Jews (approximately 30,000), Muslims (approximately 20,000), Greek Catholics (members of the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church), Old Believers (priestist and priestless), members of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and other Orthodox Christian groups, Lutherans (approximately 1,500),

Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians and other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Buddhists. Most ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, are Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess or not to profess and spread any religious belief and to participate in acts of worship and religious rituals and rites that are not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations shall be regulated by the law "with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people." It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country's sovereignty, its constitutional system, and "civic harmony"; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; "impede the execution of state, public, and family duties" by its citizens; or are detrimental to public health and morality. It also prohibits the creation of political parties or other associations, or political activities that propagate religious hatred. The constitution states the law shall determine conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute. It stipulates the state may grant asylum to persons persecuted in other states for their religious beliefs.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA), subordinate to the Council of Ministers, regulates all religious matters. The office takes part in drafting and implementing state policies on religious affairs, enforces and protects religious rights and freedom, monitors activities of religious organizations and compliance with their charters, regulates relations between the state and religious organizations, liaises with state agencies and religious organizations upon their request, promotes tolerance and mutual understanding between religious organizations of various faiths and nationalities, and researches dynamics and trends in interdenominational relations to prevent

“religious exclusiveness” and disrespectful treatment of religions and nationalities. The executive committees of the country’s six oblasts (regions) and Minsk city have departments for ideology and youth engagement that include coverage of religious issues. These departments are independent from OPRRNA but share information with it. The president appoints and may dismiss the plenipotentiary representative heading OPRRNA, based on a nomination from the Council of Ministers.

The law recognizes the “determining role” of the BOC, an exarchate (affiliate) of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the development of the traditions of the people, as well as the historical importance of four other religious groups commonly referred to as “traditional” faiths: Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as traditional faiths newer religious groups or older groups such as the priestless Old Believers, Uniates, and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century. A concordat between the authorities and the BOC provides the church with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC’s “influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people.” Although the concordat states that it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, it calls for the authorities and the BOC to combat unnamed “pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society.” The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies pursuant to presidential orders. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word “orthodox” in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country’s Orthodox patron saint.

The concordat serves as the framework for at least a dozen cooperation agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies, including with the Ministries of Defense, Healthcare, and Information. There is also an agreement with the Ministry of Education through 2025 that provides for joint projects for the “spiritual and moral education” of students based on BOC traditions and history.

There are no explicit laws on either hate speech or hate crimes, but the law criminalizes inciting racial, national, religious, or other social hatred or discord on the basis of racial, national, religious, linguistic or other social affiliation, penalties for which range from a fine to five years in prison. Such action connected with violence or committed by an official using his powers is punishable from three to 10 years' imprisonment and if committed by a group causing severe consequences or deaths, is penalized by five to 12 years in prison.

The law on combating extremism prohibits activities of religious organizations to plan, organize, prepare and commit encroachments upon independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, constitutional order, and public security by inciting religious enmity, by organizing mass riots or other actions grossly violating public order based on religious hostility and by propagating language of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens based on their social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliation. The law also bans establishing and running extremist groups aiming to conduct extremist activities, including based on the grounds of racial, national, religious hostility or discord, and to justify Nazism, punishable from three to seven years in prison and up to 10 years if committed by an official.

The criminal code defines committing a crime based on racial, national, or religious hostility or discord as an aggravating factor. It also criminalizes genocide, including based on religious grounds, with punishment ranging from 12 year's imprisonment to the death penalty, as well as murder and crimes against humanity, including deportation, extrajudicial executions, kidnapping, torture and violence based on the civilian population's religion. The punishment for the latter ranges from seven years in prison to the death penalty.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons older than 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, and one of these communities must have been active in the country for at least 20 years. National-level religious associations have the ability to establish regional and local religious associations. National religious associations

earn recognition only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country's six oblasts.

According to OPRRNA data, as of January 1, there were 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,409 religious communities and 173 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,726 religious communities, 15 dioceses, six schools, 36 monasteries, one mission, 15 brotherhoods, and nine sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, six schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 500 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 13 denominations encompass 1,040 religious communities, 21 associations, 21 missions, and five schools. There are 34 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 50 communities. There are 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – registered.

The national religious associations are the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Old Believers Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, Association of New Apostolic Churches, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, Jewish Religious Union, Association of Jewish Religious Communities, Union of Reform Judaism Communities, Muslim Religious Association, Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Religious Association of Baha'is.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application containing the following information: a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and confirmation from regional authorities of the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious community not previously registered by the authorities must also submit information about its beliefs. The law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a new registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion, as well as its

rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services; proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches toward marriage and family; educational activities; attitudes toward health care; and compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion, information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents, a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced, and a list of countries officially recognizing the religion. It also must submit information about countries that have refused to recognize the religion and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional authorities, as well as Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk), review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community, an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document, violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations, and a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

To register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and to organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applicants must submit forms to establish religious associations and national associations to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities, except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather than a community. Applicants may appeal in court refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for

violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. The authorities may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The authorities may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law does not contain a provision for appealing a warning or suspension.

The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups. On January 4, the government amended the criminal code to criminalize activities conducted on behalf of unregistered groups, which are punishable by up to two years imprisonment. Before January 4, individuals could face fines up to 870 Belarusian rubles (\$350) for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations.

The housing code permits registered religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. Local authorities must certify that the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. The authorities do not grant such permission automatically, and the law prohibits religious groups from holding services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities, which may approve residential worship on an ongoing basis subject to revocation.

By law, all religious groups must obtain permits to hold events outside of their premises, including when proselytizing.

The law penalizes organizing and participating in unauthorized gatherings, the announcement of an intention to hold a mass event before securing official authorization, training protesters, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance "to the detriment" of the country. Included in the definition of "mass event" are religious events held in places not especially intended for this purpose, whether in the open air or indoors. The law requires organizers to request permission from authorities to hold a mass event, including those involving religious groups, 15 days before the event. Some violations of the law prohibiting unauthorized mass events may be punishable by up to three years'

imprisonment. Authorities must inform organizers of a denial no later than five days before the event.

Authorities have a system of reimbursements for security, medical, and cleaning services required from organizers of mass events, including religious events held outside of religious premises and sites, rallies, competitions, cultural events, festivals, concerts, and similar occasions. Authorities cover costs associated with events that are officially sponsored at the local and national levels. A 2021 amendment requires organizers to sign contracts for services before applying for a permit to hold a mass event and reimburse all costs within 10 days.

The law requires all religious groups receive prior approval from the authorities to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for restitution to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of, or compensation for, seized property that is being used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy but does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law permits only registered religious groups that are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the Ministry of Education; the BOC is the only religious group to have such an agreement. Even with such an agreement in place, students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “Such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’s sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating

human rights and freedoms.” Middle school students have the option of voluntary weekly classes on “Spiritual and Moral Culture and Patriotism,” which focus on Russian Orthodox Church history and traditions.

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in any school without identifying themselves, regardless of whether there is an agreement with the Ministry of Education. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow private religious elementary, junior, or senior high schools or homeschooling for religious reasons.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in prison for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. The law allows alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Military service typically lasts from six to 18 months; alternative service can last up to 36 months. By law, individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in prison.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRRNA must grant permission before foreign clergy may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. The authorities generally grant such permission for a period of one year, and they may reduce or extend permissions. OPRRNA has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas) and may deny requests without explanation. If OPRRNA does not respond, it does not grant permission for a permit. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the authorities permit foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish

to another, require prior permission from the authorities. By law, foreigners may not lead religious groups. Authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other state agencies, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country – a decision that is beyond appeal.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). On October 27, President Lukashenka signed a law to withdraw the country's participation in the ICCPR Optional Protocol, which establishes the right for individuals to register complaints regarding violation of ICCPR provisions to the UN Human Rights Committee after exhausting domestic remedies. The law entered into force on October 29.

Government Practices

Throughout the year, according to local and international civil society groups, authorities used legislation banning “unauthorized mass events” to target prodemocracy protestors – including members of the clergy – in the wake of the 2020 presidential election widely criticized as fraudulent. Authorities used the same legislation against members of the clergy protesting Russia's war against Ukraine. Authorities continued to harass individuals, including clergy, who expressed disagreement with the Lukashenka regime, criticized violence by agencies under its control, or criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine. After sustained harassment and threat of punishment by the regime, many religious leaders and clergy reportedly chose to refrain from commenting publicly or online on regime actions. The authorities stated remarks by religious leaders constituted interference in what they deemed to be political affairs.

On August 31, police detained for 14 days BOC priest and teacher of philosophy at the Minsk Theological Academy Uladzislau Bahamolnikau, who vocally supported the 2020 protests, organized a hunger strike in support of political prisoners, and fundraised for Ukrainian refugees and the Ukrainian army. Authorities reportedly later charged him with reposting “extremist” materials, and he served additional

days in jail through December 19 when he was released on his own recognizance and banned from leaving the country. Authorities reportedly charged him with participating in the 2020 protests.

On October 14, a court in Rassony declared “extremist” a January 29 interview with Roman Catholic priest Vyachaslau Barok, in which the priest criticized the regime’s human rights abuses and mistreatment of political prisoners. Authorities forced Barok to leave the country in June 2021 after threats of criminal prosecution for his criticism of the Lukashenka’s regime’s response to the 2020 protests and charges of repeated violations of the law pertaining to mass events. Barok remained in exile in Poland and was not able to return to the country as of the year’s end.

On July 28, a court in Homyel fined Dzmitry Padlobka, the pastor of the local Full Gospel Living Faith Church, 640 rubles (\$250) for holding an unauthorized baptism at a private home on July 9. On August 24, police warned him against holding any other unsanctioned mass events, for which he could face criminal liability, and required him to report to the police “for a conversation on prevention [of offenses]” every month.

On February 28, according to the independent, Belarus-focused monitoring group Christian Vision, police in Minsk detained BOC priest Mikhail Maruha at an antiwar rally and sentenced him to 13 days’ detention for his participation in the rally.

In March-April, according to the international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18, police across the country summoned and warned approximately 20 BOC priests who had signed an online March 1 letter calling for “reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine” and condemning regime suppression of protests against the war. Authorities reportedly threatened the priests with possible criminal liability for future actions.

On March 25, according to Christian Vision, police in the town of Cherykau in Mahilyou oblast detained Baptist pastor Raman Razhdzestvenski and confiscated his computer and a cell phone. Authorities accused him of disseminating or

storing extremist information on his Facebook account in 2020, based on materials published by independent media. Released the same day, authorities subsequently fined Razhdzestvenski 640 rubles (\$250) for possessing “extremist” information on April 5.

Also on March 25, police in Mahilyou arrested Greek Catholic priest Vasily Yahorau because of a “Ukraine, forgive us” sticker on his car’s bumper. Held in pretrial detention for three days, a district court in Mahilyou fined him 1,600 rubles (\$640) on March 28 for violating the law on mass events, an umbrella law frequently used by the authorities to stifle any form of protest or expression against the regime, even on an individual basis.

On March 29, according to human rights observers, Polish citizen Father Andrzej Bulczak, who had served in the country for more than 14 years and was a parish priest of the Jesus the Merciful Roman Catholic Church in Pastavy in Vitsebsk Oblast, left the country after authorities searched his home and threatened him with criminal prosecution. On March 7, Bulczak had posted a video on YouTube featuring a girl writing a letter to a friend in Poland describing her opposition to the war in Ukraine and showing a logo of the Polish-based Belsat TV channel (characterized by authorities as “extremist”) and an opposition white-red-white flag, representing support for the prodemocracy movement. Following his departure from the country, authorities revoked his religious permission to serve and a religious visa to stay in the country. Additionally, on May 13, a court in Pastavy fined him 960 rubles (\$380) in absentia for distributing extremist materials.

On April 4, a court in Pastavy in Vitsebsk Oblast ordered the detention for eight days of Roman Catholic priest Alyaksandr Baran, serving at Saint Andrew’s Church in the town of Lyntupy, on charges of disseminating extremist materials for posting an opposition white-red-white flag and a Ukrainian flag on social media. Authorities held Baran in pretrial detention March 25-31, and he served the remainder of his term after the April 4 hearing. They detained him for an additional 17 days on similar charges on August 9.

On April 28 a court in Staubtsy fined Ihar Lashuk, the Roman Catholic priest of the Saint Kazimir parish, 960 rubles (\$380) for distributing “extremist” materials, including content published by Radio Liberty. Lashuk organized special prayer services in parishes located in the vicinity of the Ukrainian border on March 4, calling for peace after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A court in Horki initially dismissed charges against local Roman Catholic priest Andrei Keulich for distributing “extremist materials” from Radio Liberty and Polish-based TV Belsat, but after police reformulated and resubmitted materials to the court, it fined him 640 rubles (\$250) at a rescheduled hearing on May 12. Authorities also briefly detained him on April 18.

On July 8, a court in Smarhon fined Roman Catholic priest Yauheni Uchkuronis of the Saint John Paul II parish 640 rubles (\$250) for reposting content from the Polish-based TV Belsat, declared extremist by the regime, on social media.

On September 9, a Vitebsk district court fined in absentia Roman Catholic priest Andrei Vashchuk of the Holy Spirit parish 320 rubles (\$130) for posting “a caricature of a swastika in a Telegram channel chat.” On July 15, security officers arrested Vashchuk, and he served 30 days detention on charges of disseminating extremist materials and holding unsanctioned mass events. He left the country on August 15.

On October 11, independent media reported that authorities in Minsk, acting on the basis of video and photo footage on social media, detained Siarhei Paulouski, the pastor of the Full Gospel New Generation Church, for his participation in 2020 protests.

Independent media reported that on November 4, courts in Brest ordered the detention of Greek Catholic priest Ihar Kandrat and Ihar Baranouski, the editor of the independent newspaper Tsarkva (Church), for 12 and 15 days, respectively. Authorities reportedly arrested both the day before and charged them with disseminating extremist materials, including from the Polish-based television outlet Belsat.

According to human rights groups, on November 11, a Minsk district court convicted Vitaly Chychmarou, the pastor of the Baptist Light of Hope Church, on charges of participating in August 2020 protests and for his engagement in independent trade union activities. The judge sentenced Chychmarou to three years of house arrest but released him after a seven-month pretrial detention.

The katolik.life religious news and monitoring portal reported on November 17 that authorities in Mahilyou detained local Roman Catholic priest Vitali Chabatar and sentenced him to 15 days of detention for posting extremist materials on his social media account.

Protestant groups say they continued to remain concerned about the authorities' ability to prosecute unregistered religious organizations, although there were no reports authorities did so during the year.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which, they said, restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized administrative penalties such as fines against individuals for their religious beliefs while the groups were unregistered. The authorities' guidelines for evaluating registration requests remained sufficiently broad and their application arbitrary, they said, to give authorities a pretext for denying requests from disfavored groups. According to human rights observers, some registration attempts made during the year were successful.

Religious groups labeled as "nontraditional" by the authorities continued to state the procedure for registering communities and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. Authorities in Lida continued to refuse to register a local community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some minority religious groups stated that they did not apply for registration because their members feared harassment by authorities and did not want to submit their names, as required by the application process. Other minority religious groups preferred to negotiate registration and other concerns with local authorities.

Sources stated that unregistered religious groups continued to maintain a low profile because of fear of prosecution and perceived regime hostility. Some registered religious communities said they were reluctant to report restrictions on their activities because they feared drawing attention to themselves.

According to human rights activists, prison administrators reportedly selectively delayed clergy visits for certain detainees, especially political prisoners. Many prisons maintained designated Orthodox religious facilities that BOC clergy were allowed to visit through the year, and some prison administrations selectively allowed different Protestant denominations to hold religious meetings for inmates.

Human rights activists reported that on March 3, riot police detained six parishioners leaving an antiwar prayer gathering at the BOC Holy Spirit Cathedral in downtown Minsk. Security forces were filming inside and outside of the church and stopped some parishioners to check their identification, while police vans waited outside. Authorities subsequently released the detainees after questioning and warned against holding additional unauthorized mass events. Separately, police arrested Dziana Seradzyuk, a journalist for the independent newspaper Novy Chas (New Times) and her spouse, opposition activist Yauhen Batura, as they were leaving Holy Spirit Cathedral on March 3. A Minsk district court held them under arrest for 15 days for disobeying police orders.

The authorities strove to censor the pan-Christian hymn “Mahutny Bozha,” (Almighty God) and they continued to harass and punish religious leaders, clergy, event organizers, and laypeople who sang or allowed or supported the singing of the hymn. The hymn became linked to the country’s post-Soviet national revival in the early 1990s, when it was proposed (unsuccessfully) as the national anthem, and it had been sung routinely by both religious communities and pro-opposition individuals since then. After the 2020 presidential election, civil society and the prodemocracy movement adopted it as an unofficial anthem and prayer, including during protests.

On May 18, the BOC transferred priest Andrei Nazdryn from a Hrodna parish to a remote parish in the village of Komatava in Hrodna oblast after a local

progovernment activist reported him singing the “Mahutny Bozha” hymn and speaking out against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in March and April. His diocese also dismissed him from the position as head of the missionary department and as the official in charge of the physical education and sports affairs of the BOC Diocese of Hrodna. In an April 25 letter, police warned Nazdryn against engaging in extremist activities and inciting social and religious hatred, for which he could be criminally liable.

According to Father Yuri Sanko, the spokesperson of the Roman Catholic Church, the church was able to hold public religious events and assemblies after obtaining official permission and paying all required fees. For example, on May 29, hundreds of individuals took part in a Corpus Christi procession in central Minsk sponsored by the church. In August, approximately 90 pilgrims walked for three days from the town of Druya to the village of Rositsa to commemorate those killed in the village by Nazis in 1943, including two priests.

According to observers, authorities continued surveillance of registered and unregistered religious groups, including monitoring the social media accounts of clergy members. The sources stated that “ideology officers” and other representatives of the Lukashenka regime continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups, including in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions based on this type of surveillance.

Authorities, including the security forces, reportedly continued to hold occasional “informal” talks with members of religious groups to learn about their activities. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered nontraditional Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment. According to these religious leaders, security officials monitored religious groups for activities or speech perceived as indicating support for the opposition or dissatisfaction with the authorities.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to their perceptions that they could face intimidation or

punishment, as proselytization without prior authorization is considered an unsanctioned mass event, and hence illegal. Some of these groups had requested authorization, but authorities either denied or ignored the requests.

According to media accounts, the BOC was free to proselytize without restrictions on television and in print media as well as in public spaces.

According to anecdotal evidence and independent media reports, clergy from religious groups labeled by the authorities both as traditional and nontraditional opted for self-censorship and avoided discussing ongoing political repression or Russia's war against Ukraine in their sermons and during services.

Authorities continued to deny the Catholic station Radio Mariya permission to broadcast via radio but did not interfere with the station's internet broadcasts.

In general, communities did not report impediments to purchases or rentals of nonsanctioned places of worship. Some religious communities with outstanding property cases, such as the Roman Catholic Saint Simon and Helena Roman Catholic Church ("Red Church") and the Full Evangelical New Life Church, both located in Minsk, continued to engage with the authorities and the legal system to resolve them. Converting residential property for religious use remained difficult. Protestant groups stated they continued to face more severe consequences than other groups because they were less likely to own religious facilities, and that they could not apply for permission to conduct religious activities in private homes because residences were too small to accommodate their numbers.

On March 22, according to reports by the religious freedom NGO Forum 18, Minsk regional authorities denied the legally registered Pomore Old Believers community of Minsk an extension of a construction permit to build its church on a plot of land previously designated by authorities in 2017. The church reportedly failed to comply with an August 2021 deadline for the filing building plans, which the church stated was not an item in meetings with officials. The community stated that BOC Metropolitan Veniamin vetoed the approval since the church,

which follows an Orthodox tradition, has remained separate from the BOC despite pressure to join.

After a fire in one of its annexes on September 26, authorities banned the Red Church from using its church building, long subject to property disputes between the regime and the Catholic Church since Soviet times. Authorities attributed the September fire to electrical issues.

On October 7, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Nationalities Affairs Alyaksandr Rumak met with the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Ante Jozic and Archbishop of Minsk-Mahilyou Josef Staneuski to discuss the Red Church. Rumak justified the church's closure to the press as necessary to examine and repair the structure following the fire, while accusing the democratic opposition and clergy in exile of "stoking hatred" between the BOC and the Catholic Church through public statements, including claims in social media that "the church will be converted into an Orthodox one." Rumak said the building would remain a Roman Catholic church, but that damage to the electric and heating supply made it impossible to continue safe operation of the building pending an examination of the damages. Recognizing what he said were "inconveniences" connected with the suspension of building operations, Rumak said local authorities would finance restoration costs. He suggested believers could visit the other 12 Roman Catholic churches in Minsk.

On October 10, the church sent a petition signed by more than 600 parishioners to the city government and the regime seeking the reopening of the building. In the letter, parish priest Uladyslau Zawalniuk expressed suspicions regarding the fire and urged against the dismantling of the sacred religious objects located inside the church. Zawalniuk said the community was banned from accessing the building, despite the Ministry of Emergency's protocol of September 26, which called for a joint survey and inventory of damaged structures and religious property by the owner of the building (the government) and the church community. On October 11, independent press reported police and unidentified officers had prevented a dozen church members and Father Zawalniuk from praying at the steps of the building and dispersed the individuals, warning against any future gatherings. Parish officials publicly stated their disbelief that the fire

damage was significant enough to warrant closure and eviction from the premises.

During the year, the New Life Church (NLC) continued to hold services in the parking lot of the building it had purchased and formerly used for church services following the church's eviction in February 2021 in the wake of a long dispute with the government regarding payment of taxes. In August, local authorities summoned NLC pastor Vyachaslau Hancharenka on multiple occasions, warning him that parishioners would face detainment and the church loss of its registration if the parking lot services continued, saying the services were illegal and neighborhood residents had complained about the unsanctioned gatherings.

In August, authorities approved construction on a new Armenian Apostolic church in a prime central location in downtown Minsk after years of deliberation.

On September 19 and 22, authorities detained Hancharenka and Antoni Bokun, the Minsk-based pastor of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, for preaching at the parking lot on September 18. Each was fined 3,200 rubles (\$1,300). Separately, authorities warned Hancharenka again of possible criminal liability. On September 25, police arrived ahead of a service and ordered the congregation to disperse. Authorities rejected NLC's multiple requests for approval to hold services in the parking lot, stating they did not comply with the mass events regulations.

On October 7, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Minsk-Mahilyou said authorities in Mahilyou had granted a five-year, free-of-charge permit to use the building of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Stanislau Church, owned by local authorities and being used and reconstructed by the local parish.

According to media reports, school administrators continued to cooperate with the BOC and no other religious groups, based on the BOC's concordat with the regime. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of church facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

The government continued to allocate funds to cover salaries of professors and employees, as well as stipends for students, of the BOC's seminaries. As in previous years, Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church said their schools did not receive any financial support from the authorities.

In compliance with the BOC cooperation agreement with the Education Ministry and various educational institutions, a coordination council, including Education Minister Andrei Ivanets, BOC Metropolitan Veniamin, and other senior officials, held a meeting to discuss the development and implementation of cooperation programs on April 6. They reportedly focused on "the importance of spiritual, moral, and patriotic education of children and youth," and the Minister of Education stressed the key role of the BOC, stating the BOC should expand such cooperation.

Unlike other religious groups, the BOC continued to participate in many state-sponsored public events, such as rallies or celebrations, without the need to seek prior approval from authorities. Regional authorities and state-run companies often included BOC representatives in their events.

Authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public venues as well as on its religious property. While the law does not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, representatives of these groups said authorities continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties. The groups said they faced harassment and possible detention if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

While BOC Metropolitan Veniamin remained neutral in his statements on Russia's invasion of Ukraine compared with ROC Patriarch Kirill's remarks, some other BOC leaders amplified Russia's propaganda on the war. On March 3, for example, Veniamin said in an official statement that combatants were "often people who are related by blood, by faith and in spirit. Military personnel are dying on both sides, and civilians are suffering." He later called upon the faithful to pray for peace to return to Ukrainian soil and for fraternal peoples to find a path to reconciliation and mutual forgiveness.

On March 28, BOC Archbishop of Navahrudak Huriy said the “war with America on Ukrainian soil” was “part of the global process of changing the world order, where Orthodox nations do not fit in.” The Archbishop reiterated his support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and amplified Russia’s claims that the Pentagon had developed biological weapons in Ukraine. In the same interview, the Archbishop stated that “Kyiv sent to America thousands of serum samples from patients primarily of Slavic ethnicity... to study the genetic data of the Slavs with the subsequent possibility of influencing us.” Archbishop Huriy also expressed in a statement of support to Patriarch Kirill that the “main moral reason for... the military operation,” was to combat the West’s “gay pride” agenda.

In his multiple interviews, sermons, and public appearances during the year, Archpriest and rector of the Saint Elizabeth Monastery in Minsk Andrei Lemiashonak said Russia had not started the war, but rather, “The whole world took up arms against Russia.” In a March 1 interview, the Archpriest justified the invasion by saying, “Donbas has been bombed for eight years” and that the war was inevitable, since “Orthodoxy was declared a threat from the West.” In an October 4 interview, he condemned Russian citizens’ leaving the country to avoid mobilization and called the Russian Orthodox clergy serving Russia’s military in the war zone “saints.”

Religious groups said the regime continued to apply visa regulations inconsistently, which affected the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country, and the visa application process remained burdensome. Officials required all foreign clergy working in the country to obtain religious permits to serve at religious institutions and conduct religious duties.

Roman Catholic clergy continued to state that foreign priests faced multiple challenges, including a lengthy approval process before obtaining permission to celebrate Mass, and that officials often issued visas for only three- to six-month authorizations.

According to sources in the Roman Catholic community, Klemens Werth, a Jesuit and Catholic priest from Russia, remained in Vitsebsk, where he continued to work in the diocese and was in charge of building a new church that was

consecrated on July 9. OPRRNA denied his religious visa request in July, which precluded him from celebrating Mass or otherwise leading religious services. On December 30, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hrodna reported that OPRRNA refused to extend the visa of Polish citizen Father Jozef Geza, who had permanently worked in the country since 1997 and left after serving his last Mass at the Hrodna's Holy Redeemer church on December 27.

The Jewish community and foreign donors worked with local authorities to erect five privately funded monuments and three plaques commemorating victims of the Holocaust at sites of mass killings in the village of Petralevichy, the towns of Smaliavichy, Slonim, and Ashmiany, and other locations in the country. Separately, the community was working to restore eight other monuments.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Antisemitic comments appeared on social media, online chat channels, and in the comment sections of local online news articles, although it was unclear whether all comments were posted by persons in the country. For example, online communities on the Russian social media platform VKontakte continued to post images and videos featuring neo-Nazi themes and calling for violence against Jews and others. Some of the content was specific to Belarus. On November 12, a proregime group called "Save Belarus" featured a post comparing Jews to neo-Nazis and accusing them of "forgetting about the Holocaust" in response to a photo of protestors in Krakow, Poland, holding an opposition white-red-white flag and the Israeli flag. The group claimed Nazi collaborators killed Belarusian Jews under the white-red-white banner. Other social media commentary was related to the war in Ukraine, including derogatory references to the Jewish identity of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Jewish communities reported instances of vandalism. On May 3, the Babruisk Jewish community reported that unknown persons vandalized the ruins of a synagogue by spray painting a "Z," which is associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There were no reports of police identifying perpetrators.

The BOC continued its annual commemoration in honor of Hauryl Belastoksky (Gabriel of Bialystok), a child allegedly killed by Jews in Bialystok in 1690. The Russian Orthodox Church considers him one of its saints and martyrs, and the BOC falls under the authority of the Russian Church on traditional practices such as this. The traditional memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3 states the "martyred and courageous Hauryl exposed Jewish dishonesty," although a trial after the boy's death acquitted the person charged with the crime. Some antisemitic references to Belastoksky remained on the BOC's official website, although in recent years the BOC's online materials focused more on his role as a regional patron saint of children. While Jewish community leaders said they prioritized other concerns, prayers for the commemoration reportedly continued to include antisemitic references.

An interreligious working group comprising the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, and Jewish communities organized seminars and educational events during the year. For example, the group held multiple seminars on issues related to interreligious and cross-culture traditions, the preservation of Holocaust memories, and the Bible as the basis for promoting spiritual unity and cultural diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Despite suspended operations of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk since February, the Chargé d'Affaires, based in Vilnius, Lithuania, and other embassy officials continued to engage on religious issues. This included meetings of the Chargé d'Affaires with religious leaders on issues related to religious freedom, including the registration of religious communities, the state of religious instruction and education for minority communities, and the freedom to express and practice religious beliefs, and state pressure on clergy for exercising their religious beliefs and participating in or commenting on political life in their personal capacities.

During the year, the Chargé d'Affaires met with BOC Metropolitan Veniamin and Catholic Archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev Iosef Staneuski. The Chargé and other embassy officials continued to meet throughout the year with representatives of

the BOC and the Roman Catholic Church, and Protestant, Jewish, and other minority religious groups, as well as with civil society activists to learn about religious activities and discuss the regime's actions that repressed religious freedom.

Embassy officials continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists and religious leaders. Embassy officials also discussed the status of the Roman Catholic community and the state's relationship with the church with diplomatic colleagues at the Apostolic Nunciature and maintained close contact with the U.S. Mission to the Holy See. The embassy maintained close coordination with likeminded foreign missions in Minsk and Vilnius on issues of religious freedom in Belarus.

The regime's political restrictions on public gatherings limited the embassy's ability to hold events and public engagements with representatives from religious communities. Embassy officials discussed antisemitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish groups.

In November, the Chargé participated in an event commemorating Holocaust victims at the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Minsk. The embassy shared on social media photos from the event in memory of the thousands of Jewish victims, to show support for the country's Jewish community and to emphasize the importance of historical accuracy.